

Maroc: The Art of Sama^ˆ in Fez. Recorded by Ted Levin, accompanying notes by Azzeddine Kharchafi Disques VDE-Gallo, <http://www.vdegallo.ch>, CD 1104

Tony Langlois

The Orchestra Ahl-Fa^ˆhs, under their director, Muhammad Bennis, performs all the music featured on this contemporary recording. It illustrates the exclusively male tradition of religious song and chant collectively known as sama^ˆ (literally meaning “audition”), most associated in Fez, Marocco, with Sufi fraternities. Because of their origins in ritual (or, at least, ritualistic) performance, three of the four pieces presented here have fairly basic instrumental accompaniment, as the choir’s vocal role takes priority. Two broad forms of music are included in this record: first, those that are based upon religious poetry, which have much in common with the more secular Andalus art music tradition; second, those which are essentially in the form of a chant, presumably drawn more from the dhikr ceremonies of Sufi brotherhoods. These include the repetition of sacred formulas, such as the shahada: the first part of the Islamic profession of faith (La ilaha illa Allah _ ‘there is no god but God’), sometimes delivered with the exaggerated exhalations associated with these ritual contexts. In common with the Andalus vocal style, the sung poetry is effectively heterophonic; here the lead singer accompanies the chorus with a melismatic embellishment of core melodies.

Although the voice takes centre stage on this CD, instrumental introductions and accompaniments play an important role in the structure of sama^ˆ concerts, and here the performances are polished and expert. The ensemble, “ud (lute) derrbuka (goblet drum), tar (frame drum), ney (flute), rebab (two string fiddle), and violin accompanies a choir of five

male voices. This arrangement is more in keeping with the traditional size of such groups rather than the large orchestras that have developed more recently elsewhere in North Africa. Although such massed choirs and large ensembles can convey a grandeur of their own, this size of group has more of a ‘chamber ensemble’ feel about it, which in my opinion allows the listener to appreciate the more subtle qualities of these instruments.” The recordings themselves, made in 1997 (presumably in situ, though the notes do not tell us), are clear and very listenable to. The chosen pieces display a range of styles, which, despite the familiar discourse linking North African art musics to 12th century Andalusia, is perhaps as much a testimony to the diverse cultural influences that Fez itself has absorbed since then.

The illustrated sleeve notes, in French and English, do a very good job of explaining the basic structures of Arabic music. However, they might have been better linked to the recordings themselves and it would have been useful to have had more information that placed the repertoire in its contemporary context. For example, though extensive quotations from Chottin (1939) and Guettat (1980) are employed to describe Muwashshah and zajal (two forms of classical Andalusian poetry which have influenced the structure of Moroccan art musics), the reader is not told which of the recordings exhibit these characteristics. The musical information is accurate but so general that the pieces on the CD are not explained. Similarly, though we are provided with a brief history of the ensemble it is not entirely clear what their associations with Sufi practices are. Both *sama* and *dhikr* (‘remembrance’ of God through musical repetition) are well-documented aspects of rituals intended to bring about *wajd*, or ‘spiritual trance’ (see Rouget 1985). Mention is made of the performance of *sama* during the *mussem* (festival) of Moulay Idriss, and the condition of *khamra* (state of spiritual ‘drunkenness’) that singers attain therein, but the reader is not told whether the ensemble is

actually a part of such fraternities or are professional musicians who came together with the explicit purpose of preserving these traditions. While this information would not change the quality of the performance or recording, it would nevertheless be useful for academic purposes.

Regardless of some shortcomings in the notes, this CD provides a good record of a musical tradition that has probably existed in Fez in something like this form for centuries. Its links to medieval Andalusian music will doubtless appeal to historical musicologists as much as its continued importance in Moroccan culture will to ethnomusicologists. In addition, the recording offers an opportunity to compare this local manifestation with similar genres to be found in other cities throughout the Maghreb. Today, much of the Andalus tradition has been ‘secularized’, partly through its appropriation by North African states as a vehicle of national heritage and its subsequent esteemed role in cultural policies. This current use of Andalus tends to play down the significant associations it once had with both the Jewish communities of North Africa and with Sufi practices. As well as being a very enjoyable recording to listen to, this CD provides welcome evidence of the aesthetic overlap that once existed between religious and art music in Morocco.

References

- Chottin, A. 1939. *Tableau de la musique Marocaine*. Paris: Paul Geuthner.
Guettat, M. 1980. *La Musique classique du Maghreb*. Paris: Sindbad.